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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000366

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: BURMESE IDPS AND REFUGEES NEED MORE HELP

REF: A. RANGOON 319  
[B. RANGOON](#) 272  
[C. RANGOON](#) 235  
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[E. 05 RANGOON](#) 1444

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: A visiting PRM team discussed refugee and IDP issues with IOs and donor counterparts in Rangoon March 8-10. UNHCR described its activities in northern Rakhine State and efforts to improve access to eastern border areas. ICRC outlined its lack of access to prisons and labor camps, but explained that its other programs in Burma continue. WFP spoke of challenges and opportunities in northern Rakhine State and northern Shan State. The different organizations PRM met still fill a vital role in Burma and need continued support. END SUMMARY.

[12.](#) (SBU) PRM program officers Rafael Foley and Hoa Tran visited Rangoon March 8-10. (Regional Refugee Coordinator Michael Honnold, based in Bangkok, was unable to obtain a Burma visa in time to accompany them.) They met with UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC), and World Food Program (WFP) officers and with INGOs to discuss support for refugees and IDPs in northern Rakhine State and along the Burma-Thai border.

UNHCR IN NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

[13.](#) (SBU) UNHCR Representative Jean-Francois Durieux stated that through its network of local staff, UNHCR has access to all villages in northern Rakhine State (NRS). This access allows UNHCR to intervene to mitigate the most egregious GOB abuses against the local population of 800,000 Rohingyas, a Muslim minority facing continued harassment and discrimination at the hands of the Burmese government. UNHCR's focus on the approximately 230,000 Rohingyas refugees who have voluntarily repatriated from Bangladesh since 1993 has served as its entry point for the provision of protection to all other Rohingyas in NRS.

[14.](#) (C) UNHCR described its access to NRS as "exceptional by Burma standards." Recent GOB restrictions on UN agencies and international NGOs have not affected UNHCR in NRS and it continues to have relatively free and unhindered access. Describing the situation in NRS as "extremely precarious," UNHCR reported that the ethnic Rohingyas' statelessness remains at the root of their other problems, resulting from the GOB's constraint of nearly every aspect of the Rohingyas' lives (ref C).

[15.](#) (SBU) UNHCR faces problems in NRS because it lacks useful baseline data. Due to a gap in data collection since 2003, UNHCR is trying to reconstruct village profiles it maintained previously. UNHCR's data problems are common to most UN agencies and NGOs that work in Burma, where official data is unreliable and data collection is ever a challenge. UN agencies in Burma are trying to coordinate data collection using their "Myainfo" software package to share data. UNHCR currently collects data on 99 indicators, but hopes it can reduce the indicators to a more manageable size soon.

[16.](#) (C) Durieux says that once returnees are settled, UNHCR normally phases out its programs, but the Rohingyas are a special case. Returnees remain far outside the GOB system of limited services. He believes UNHCR must continue working in NRS until the Rohingyas obtain "minimal legal status." Even if the GOB declared the Rohingyas "stateless," this would be progress, he said, because stateless persons have certain rights, as do refugees. Durieux estimates it will take over a generation until the Rohingyas are able to obtain citizenship.

UNHCR ON THE EASTERN BORDER

[17.](#) (C) UNHCR began working on the eastern border in 2004 to assess conditions and to create an "absorption capacity" for potential returnees from Thai refugee camps. The original optimism that the SPDC and the KNU would reach a peace agreement has vanished, and UNHCR says repatriation of

refugees from Thailand is not an option. Durieux recalled a recent meeting he had with the Minister of Home Affairs. Durieux did not find the minister receptive to the terms "refugees" or "internally displaced persons." To the minister they were all "terrorists." While UNHCR local staff have free and unhindered access to areas along the eastern border, the GOB has restricted expatriate staff from visiting there nearly one year.

18. (C) To maintain its minimal presence along the eastern border, UNHCR implements EU-funded micro projects, building clinics, schools, wells, and bridges. UNHCR implemented 138 such projects in 2005. While most are now completed, UNHCR staff continue to monitor them. Although UNHCR has identified 100 new project sites in the eastern states, they have not implemented any new projects in 2006. UNHCR hopes to visit Karen State in April with the Ministry of Border Development (called "NaTaLa" in Burmese) and the EU Humanitarian Aid representative (ref A). Their ultimate goal is to travel in the east as freely as they do in NRS -- without GOB escorts.

#### ICRC KEEPS THE SHOP OPEN

19. (C) ICRC Head of Delegation, Patrick Vial, explained that, although ICRC had to suspend its prison visits, it maintains its other programs while waiting for a change in the political climate (ref B). These programs include support for prosthetics centers and promotion and dissemination of humanitarian principles to the GOB and ethnic armies. ICRC planned to conduct a seminar in Mandalay in mid-March on "International Humanitarian Law." The Regional Commander approved the plan in January, but canceled permission at the last minute. ICRC believes that program publicity via exile radio may have caused the Regional Commander to have second thoughts. Like others, Vial found ICRC's relations with the GOB started to deteriorate after the ouster of former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. ICRC knows it may be a long wait for renewed access and is planning accordingly. Since the beginning of the year, the ICRC has reduced its expatriate staff by 13 positions and currently has 40 expatriates working in country.

10. (C) According to Vial, the Minister of Home Affairs believes that ICRC is interfering in the prisons, not helping. The minister has stopped dialogue with ICRC completely. Senior General Than Shwe also holds a negative opinion of ICRC due to its past ties with Khin Nyunt and insurgent groups, and its links to Western countries. ICRC is now trying to start a dialogue with Prime Minister Soe Win through its Geneva headquarters, and is trying to encourage Asian countries to influence the GOB in a positive direction. At the same time, ICRC prefers that Western countries do not speak out on its behalf, as that could lead to further setbacks in Burma.

11. (C) Although ICRC sees no short-term solution, ICRC staff can still move freely to visit its sub-offices and do not have to request GOB permission to travel. ICRC also accepts complaints about child soldier cases, which the ILO passes on to ICRC because it is currently too risky for ILO to handle them. ICRC still maintains a field office in Kengtung, Shan State, despite access issues to southern Shan State. This field office continues to receive occasional arrest reports. ICRC keeps it open because, once closed, it might be very difficult to reopen. ICRC continues to operate a very successful prosthetic hospital in Pa-an, Karen State, and continues to supply seven GOB-run prosthetic centers around the country. Without ICRC's support these centers would likely all close down. To date ICRC has treated 18,000 prosthetics patients throughout Burma. ICRC still works with the Myanmar Red Cross Society to transmit letters between prisoners and their families. ICRC provides financial support to prisoners to return home after their release. ICRC is able to obtain updated information on prisoners and prison conditions when released prisoners visit their office. The ICRC also gives financial support to family members to visit their relatives incarcerated in remote prisons.

#### WORLD FOOD PROGRAM IN BURMA

12. (SBU) UNHCR asked WFP to join them in NRS to help feed returnees. Besides providing new returnees with essential food commodities for the first two months, WFP also helps other vulnerable groups, including children under five, pregnant women, and new mothers. In addition, WFP implements food-for-work for adults and food-for-education to encourage primary school children to attend school.

13. (SBU) WFP faces many challenges in Burma to satisfy the requirements of both donors and Burmese organizations, but believes it has succeeded. WFP country director, Bhim Udas, said that Aung San Suu Kyi previously agreed that WFP could operate in Burma as long as WFP, not the government, identified beneficiaries, delivered the food commodities, and ensured that food reached the right people. WFP mainly operates through NGO partners to deliver food aid, but closely monitors deliveries to ensure there is no GOB

interference. Its NGO partners often add value to the food assistance by implementing complementary projects, such as water and sanitation and microfinance, but not enough NGOs operate in Burma to collaborate on all of WFP's programs. Udas stated that WFP has funding to cover only 65 percent of its operational needs in NRS, and asked the USG to consider contributing in order to reach more beneficiaries. He mentioned an urgent need for edible oil, and noted that the GOB allows WFP to import this commodity from foreign sources.

¶14. (SBU) Besides NRS, WFP also works in the central dry zone and in northern Shan State. GOB restrictions on the movement of people and food exist in both NRS and Shan State, and cause similar problems. Not only does WFP experience lengthy delays in shipping food to the beneficiaries, many people are not able to move to or access markets. Udas noted one case in the Wa region where a farmer cut down three thousand lychee trees because he could not obtain permits to sell the crop to Chinese export markets (ref E). China recently allowed sugarcane farmers in Shan State to sell their crops in China, but little land is suitable for growing sugarcane. WFP says frustration is growing in the region, because when they grew poppies they did not have to worry about finding a market; the market came to them. While Wa authorities have encouraged poppy farmers in the mountains to move to lowlands and plant alternative crops, the new crops lack markets. People in both NRS and Shan State border areas do not have ID cards, therefore government authorities do not permit them to travel to other towns and cities to find work.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The restrictions that IOs and NGOs face in Burma make a hard job even harder. The ICRC, UNHCR, and WFP have found ways to deliver vitally needed services without compromising their humanitarian principles, independence, or clear mandates. Increased U.S. assistance to some of the most vulnerable populations in Burma, especially the Rohingyas in NRS, would be very welcome by UNHCR and WFP. The UN agencies have relatively greater access to this area and assistance would thwart GOB efforts to destroy the Rohingyas. IDPs suffer elsewhere, but access is much more restricted, such as along the Burma-Thai border. The Home Affairs Minister's characterization of these people as "terrorists" reinforces the importance of our resolving the "material support" issue in a way that does not appear to confirm the Minister's characterization. END COMMENT.

VILLAROSA